# VENTURA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

Vol. XXIV, No. 3

Spring 1979

# Ventura County Historical Society

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# The Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly

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Grant W. Heil, Editor

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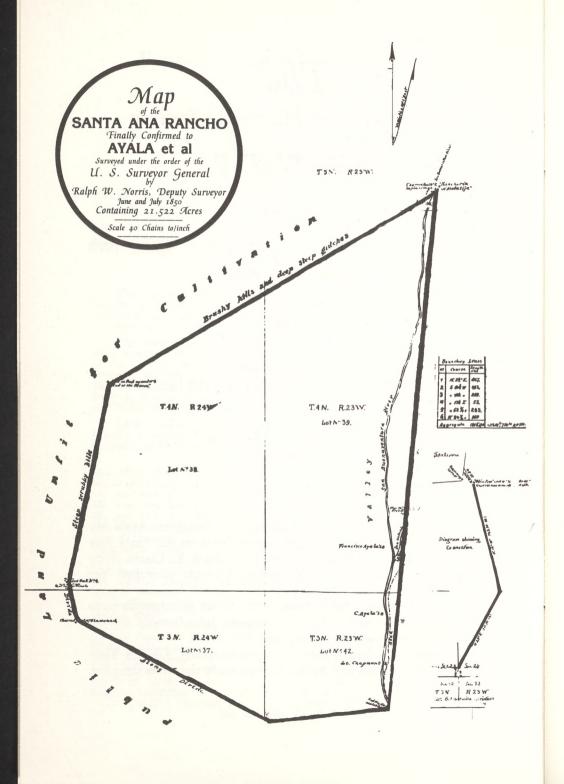
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## Notice

The cattle brands of Cosme Vanegas and Crisogono Ayala are unknown; Erdrey Pinkerton includes others found on the Santa Ana grant. Kenneth Ayers, Michael Barnard, William P. Clark, Ruby Cummings, Katherine Haley and Ramon Vanegas identified the brands.

The scenic views are by William Aplin. Other photographs were lent by the Ventura County Historical Museum, John Barnard, Robert O. Browne, Robert Nye, Gird Percy and Jack Selby.

The maps came from Ventura County Graphics. Charles Mac-Gregor drew the brands, and Robert Garven made the cover drawing.



## The Santa Ana

## LAND GRANT AND MOUNTAIN VALLEY

By R. Gird Percy

Rancho Santa Ana was one of the 19 land grants of Ventura County. Most of these gifts of thousands of acres were made in the 1840's to prominent Californians who were in the favor of the current governor in Monterey. Only rough surveys were made of these areas with natural boundaries of mountains or streams as a rule. Prior to the time of the Americans there was no accurate accounting. The Santa Ana was given to Crisogono Ayala and Cosme Vanegas, an area of approximately 21,500 acres. Fernando Tico had turned it down because it would make too much land with his Rancho Ojai to pay taxes, although they were low. The Santa Ana Grant was from the east side of the Ventura River to Matilija Canyon, then west along the base of the mountain range to Coyote Creek, then south to the top of Red Mountain following the ridge east to the bank of the Ventura River at the point of beginning.

Eventually they split the grant, Ayala taking the south half and Vanegas the north. There was no such thing as a fence to show just what each one owned. When Vanegas died, his widow turned the management over to José Arnaz with the explanation that her sons were too wild to manage the property as it should be. By the 1870's the grant could be broken up and portions sold to different parties since it was patented to 12 members of the Ayala family and

Crisogono Ayala

Cosme Vanegas

Ramon Gonzales de la Riva and sons



two of the Vanegas. The lower portion was bought from Ayala by Ramon Gonzales de la Riva who, in turn, sold what became the Nye Ranch to Arturo Oreña; the land comprising Casitas Ranch and Foster Park he disposed of to Robert Ayers. As late as 1900 the ruins of the Vanegas adobes stood to the northeast of the Nye house. They were built on a small mesa, well out of reach of any flood waters. Prior to building his home Arnaz had occupied one of them.

In the early days of Ventura County the only road between Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties was along The Rincon. In a number of places it was necessary to wait for a low tide to pass; so in 1877 a road was built through Casitas Pass. This road turned off at Foster Park and followed up the canyon of Coyote Creek, crossed over a grade into Little Casitas and over another grade into the Carpinteria Valley. It was narrow and steep in places but it made a connection to Ventura and Ojai where Coyote Creek and Ventura River joined. It was no benefit to the larger part of the Santa Ana Valley.

The largest sale of thousands of acres was to Robinson, Fawcett & Dean. Their acquisition extended from the Ventura River to a

Robert Ayers Ayers & Charlebois AC



The Casitas

portion on Coyote Creek. It was more of a real estate proposition than ranching although they did pasture and raise hay on parts of it. Robinson, Fawcett & Dean had the land properly surveyed and mapped, and began to sell parcels of 100 to 150 acres to settlers. Prices were low for this undeveloped land. Some of these parcels were along the Ventura River below the grade into the upper valley and others were along Santa Ana Creek. It was then that the first wagon road was built into the Santa Ana Valley through the Robinson, Fawcett & Dean holdings; and that encouraged settlers to buy.

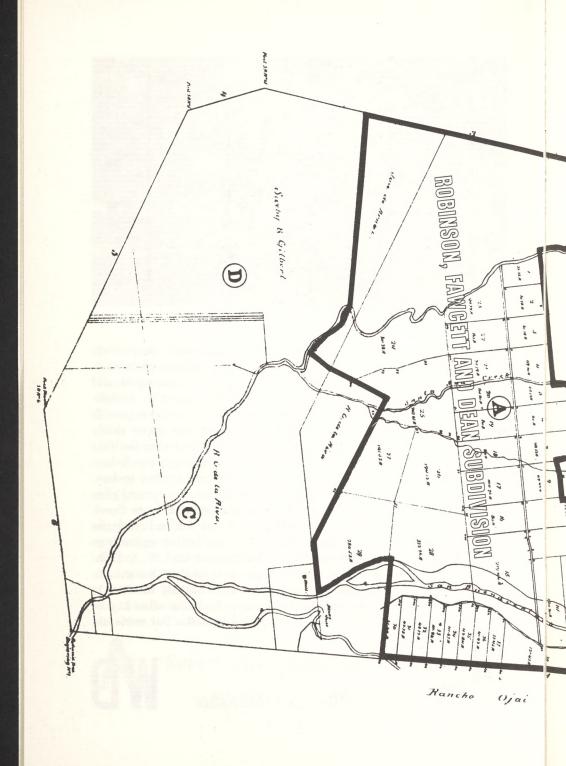
Among the early buyers was Winfield S. Dunshee, a young man from Santa Barbara. There was a tract of land along Coyote Creek which took his fancy. The creek was bordered with oak and sycamore trees, and could be tapped by a ditch and flume farther upcreek to irrigate 30 acres. On a hill overlooking the bottom land W. S. Dunshee built his house on land above the high water mark of the stream. Here he also planted a variety of fruit trees, undoubtedly the first in the Santa Ana Valley. In addition to 10 acres of alfalfa, other higher land had hay crops of oats. He was a young bachelor but evidently

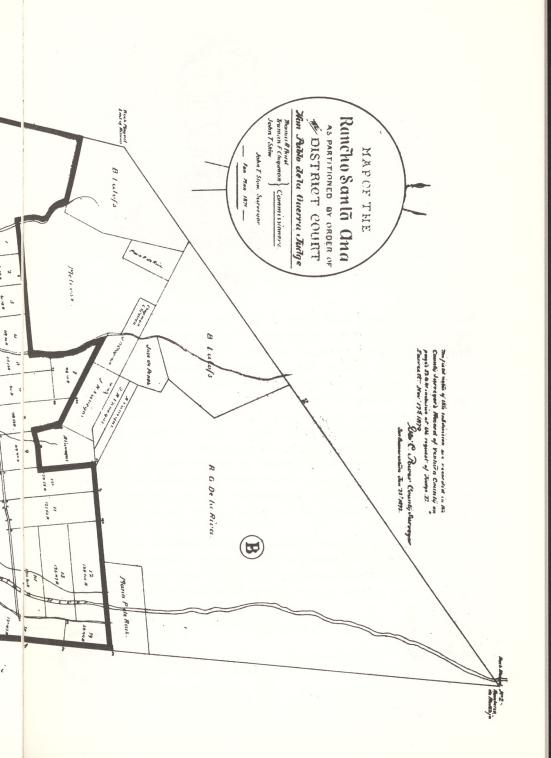


Richard Robinson

W. S. Dunshee









Henry Dubbers

became acquainted with some of the young ladies in the town of Ventura which was 12 miles away. Among them was the oldest daughter of George Gilbert, Sr., who was the first American girl born in Ventura County not of California heritage. Jessie became Mrs. Dunshee early in 1888, and their first child was born the following year in May of 1889.

Another pioneer settler was José J. Boronda, the son of a Boronda who had received the Carmel Valley Grant in earlier times. He bought land adjoining the Dunshee property on the east. Others were Vince, Poplin and the McFarlands. Eventually Eugene Fawcett, Sr. and Dean sold their interest in the unsold portions to Richard Robinson. He never lived on the property but had a Californian in charge, raising horses, cattle and hay; the latter was the principal crop grown on cultivated lands.

As the valley began to settle a school was needed. In those days it required only five children of school age in attendance to have the county build a schoolhouse and hire a teacher. Robinson donated an acre in the middle of the valley and a one-room school was built.

JJ J. J. Boronda

Henry Dubbers





Lloyd Selby

In the following years there were times when it was difficult to find the necessary five, and there were seldom more than 10 children. Most of them were from the several California families who worked or leased the properties of absentee owners. The schoolhouse was located where the road divided: one branch continuing west to the Dunshee home ranch; the other turned north and ended at the Dubbers' ranch.

Henry Dubbers was a German who lived in an adobe house in Ventura; he was the owner of a 1000-acre tract at the foot of the mountains in the northwestern part of the Santa Ana Grant, which he rented to others for a share of the hay crop. Another large tract of 2,400 acres was owned by the Sturgis family, and was later known as Rancho Matilija. A road led from their buildings across the Ventura River to the town of Nordhoff. In 1908 the Dubbers' property was sold to a Ventura lawyer, Lloyd Selby; the following year his son married my sister Zora and they moved onto the ranch. Since that time it has been known as the Selby Ranch and Selbys have lived on it for the past 69 years.

Rancho Matilija

Jack Selby SSS



Austin Denny Barnard

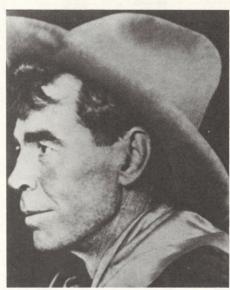
In 1927 they purchased 61.12 acres from the Barnard estate; A. D. Barnard had bought it from Ventura Avala in 1879. Barnard came to Ventura in 1868 and lived on The Avenue where his first child, Charles Ventura Barnard, was born. He purchased the home ranch on Santa Ana Road from Anderson in 1887, and a member of the family has lived there ever since.

I have personally known the Santa Ana Valley for 73 years, and that included the people who lived there before that time as well as those who lived there during these years. During my school days I worked, baling hay, during the summers. It was in 1911 that I decided to begin working for myself; my brother Earl and I started a fruit tree nursery on Ventura Avenue. Later we were awarded the contract to sprinkle the road for several miles from the Ventura city limits toward Ojai, and did other road work in our district. That job called for horses, and horses require hay. I rented 30 acres of hav land from Boronda and planted it to oats in 1913. Fred Wadleigh (whose father, O. A. Wadleigh, owned Rancho Casitas) had married a daughter of Lloyd Selby and bought several

3B Barnard Bros.

Rancho Santa Ana





Ranger Robert Clark

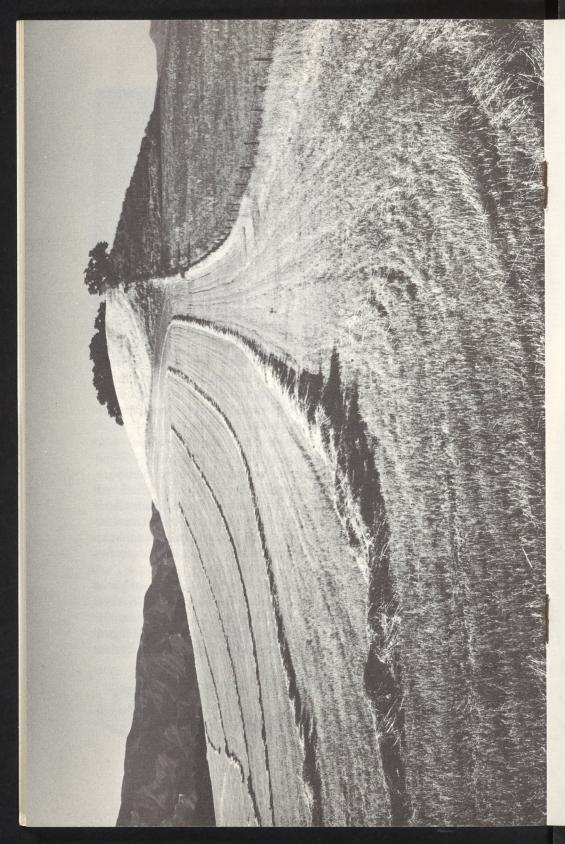
hundred acres that were still owned by Robinson; he now wanted to plant a prune orchard on a portion of his land. We sold him 4,000 trees and planted them for him. The ranchers were beginning to think in terms of more profitable crops than oat hay.

One day late in December I was working the rented land with a four-horse team, getting it ready to plant oats for a hay crop. When I reached the end of the field next to the road leading to the Dunshee home ranch, two attractive girls were riding by on horses. I had met them a few weeks before at the home of District Ranger Bob Clark who lived on a small ranch in the valley. Helen and Rolla Dunshee stopped to talk for a few minutes on their way to the schoolhouse where rural mail delivery ended. Here there were mailboxes for those who lived beyond that point.

The Dunshee family had lived in Santa Barbara for several years while their four children were in school. However Mr. Dunshee spent considerable time on the ranch where he had a California family living and working. The following day only Helen came; and again we met as I reached the end of the field and talked for a while. Helen

OAO. A. Wadleigh

Bob Clark



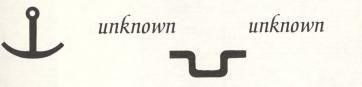


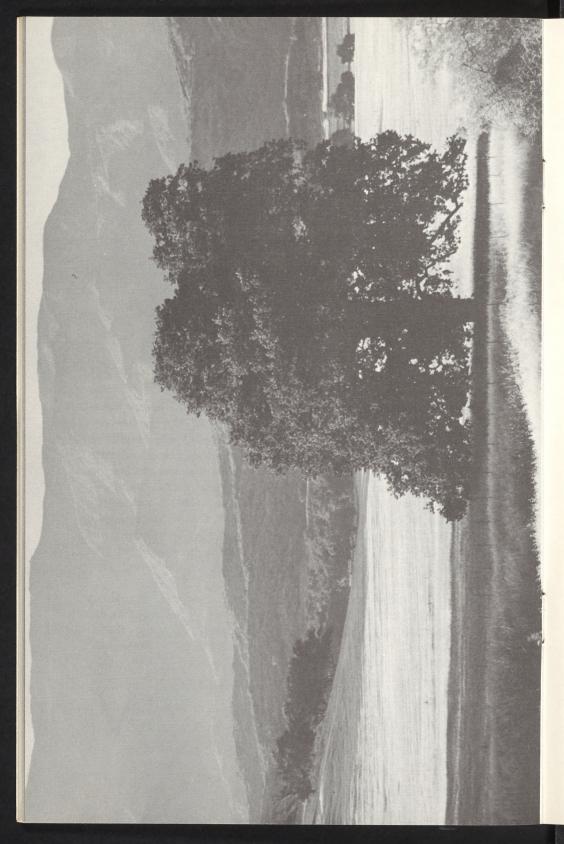
Helen Dunshee

was the older of the two sisters, and the boys were younger. She had recently graduated from Mills College in Oakland.

The hay crop was planted in the first of the year so I had no occasion to be in the Santa Ana Valley until the last of May at harvest. It was during that time Helen and I became better acquainted. I was camping beside Santa Ana Creek, and we saw each other daily when she rode over to get the mail. One day she invited me over to their home for supper. Of course I was in work clothes and hesitated in accepting. "We are ranch people," she said, " and accustomed to men in ranch clothes. Besides, there will only be my father and myself there. Mother and the others are visiting my aunt on Ventura Avenue, and I would like to have you meet him." That was the beginning of our courtship which ended in her becoming Mrs. Gird Percy in May of 1914.

As we both liked riding, a great deal of our courting was done on horseback. Even my Sundays during that year were spent in the valley which had now progressed to having telephone lines. Sometimes I came with my horse and buggy and more often on horseback.

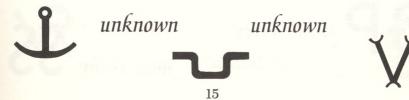






Coyote Creek

If the latter was the case, I would telephone Helen before I started; and she could meet me on Casitas Road, riding down from home on her horse. We would spend the afternoon riding the trails, one of which took us to the top of the range at Red Mountain. From there we had a view in every direction for miles: we could look down on the ocean where we saw the waves breaking along The Rincon and the Channel Islands in the distance; after the winter rains the flat was carpeted in the green of hay and the hillsides were covered with poppies where the brush was not too thick (since the bushes were mostly wild lilac, there was a solid mass of purple when it was in bloom). The ride we liked the best was along Covote Creek which was lined by large live oaks and sycamores, and there were many little flats between the canyon walls. It was a splendid trout stream, and we often saw deer feeding. Tiger lilies and ferns were found in the sheltered spots; the dainty harebells and yellow violets grew in the open places. Sometimes we took our lunch and had a picnic under the trees; occasionally we visited one of the neighbors, especially the Selby Ranch where my sister lived.





Gird Percy

After Helen and I were married, we lived on Ventura Avenue where our daughter was born September 5, 1915. A few months later her parents stopped in to see us one afternoon. Out of a clear sky Mr. Dunshee asked me if I would like to lease his Santa Ana Ranch, buy his cattle and farm the land which was not pasture. During the years since he first settled on the original property he had added to it by purchasing other land in the valley until his holdings were now over 2,000 acres, of which over 200 were cultivated and the balance in pasture. Ever since I had been old enough to have one, my ambition was to become a rancher and raise cattle and horses. To realize that dream required more money than I had accumulated, although I did have eight good work horses and an excellent saddle and driving horse. Here was my opportunity: we moved onto the ranch, and I became one of the ranchers of the Santa Ana Valley!

Our neighbors were the Selby ranch, and Fred Wadleigh and J. J. Boronda, both owners of large parcels. The smaller places of 100 to 150 acres were owned by absentee landlords, and were either leased out or operated by hired help, mostly Californians. At this

GP Gird Percy

John Selby SS



Zora and John Selby

time the Sturgis ranch of 2,400 acres was rented out to different operators.

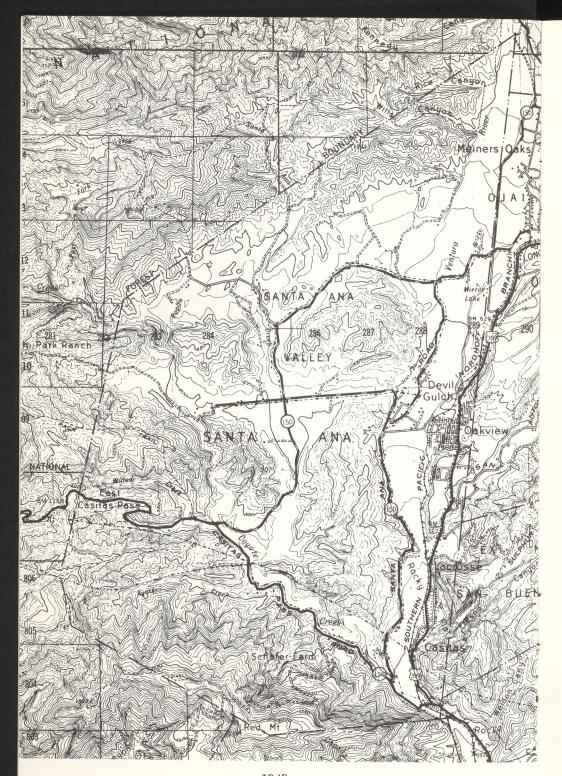
Agriculture was much different in those days. Outside of harvesters the only source of power was the horse: two, four and sixhorse teams were used. There was no limit to the day: it was work from sunup to sundown. Hired men received \$50 a month and found, and I kept two at my ranch. We did have telephone connection with the county seat when it worked and rural mail delivery except when the river was too high. This was a period of good rainfall, and the Ventura River often isolated us for several days. 1916 had an exceptionally wet winter; after almost a week of rain, every creek and gully was running with high water. A vast amount of damage was done to roads and railroads, and the whole county was cut off from the outside until repairs could be made.\* The war in Europe had been going on for some time and eventually we were involved. There were no exemptions to the draft at the start although you could apply when you registered. I did not, and eventually was told to be ready to report for duty on 24-hour notice. Then the government changed



Vince Ramos

Chismahoo Ranch







Fire in the Santa Ana hills

the rules, and farmers and married men with dependents were exempted. The only draftee from the Santa Ana Valley was my brother-in-law: Frank Dunshee had been living with us on the ranch, but he was single and in his early twenties. There was another catastrophe in the summer of 1917 when a fire on the brush-covered mountains involved both the Santa Ana and Ojai Valleys. It started in Matilija Canyon in the day and by evening had spread both ways in the mountains behind the valley. In the morning the rim of fire was from the Santa Ana Creek on the west to Topatopa Mountain on the east. After three days and nights it had a 40-mile front and ashes fell over 15 miles away in Ventura. A change in the weather and winds turned the fire back on itself, and it finally burned out after several days. Nothing was left on the mountains except ashes; but only the growing tops were destroyed and after a winter or two of good rains wild morning glory and various types of grass good for pasture came back. It is good for a few years until the brush again becomes too thick. I leased burned over pasture for about 150 cattle. Two years after the big fire my father-in-law wanted his grown

Reese Milner

George Pratt

19



De la Riva adobe

sons to take over the ranch. I moved back to Ventura Avenue but did not like farming particularly: I wanted to continue in the cattle business. In 1920 I leased the Waterhouse ranch of 3,000 acres and bought its 200 head of cows. About half the land was in the Santa Ana Grant, and Ayala's adobe home was on this west side of the river.

One of the previous owners, R. G. de la Riva, had built a large two-story house of adobe brick, plastered inside and out. It had a wide front porch, and a matching balcony on the upper story. There were four large rooms in the original part both upstairs and down, with a fireplace in each as a Spaniard would put them. The upstairs was reached by an outside stairway. Later an addition of lumber had been made in the back for a kitchen, dining room and another bedroom. The house was in excellent repair, so we moved in and lived there a couple of years.

In 1921 my second son was born, and we bought a home in Ojai for my daughter was in the first year of school; but I still kept the lease on the ranch. Another fire swept the Dunshee property, burning off the range section; I bought about 125 head of his cattle and leased

4H4 Danny Sheff
Alphonso Vanegas

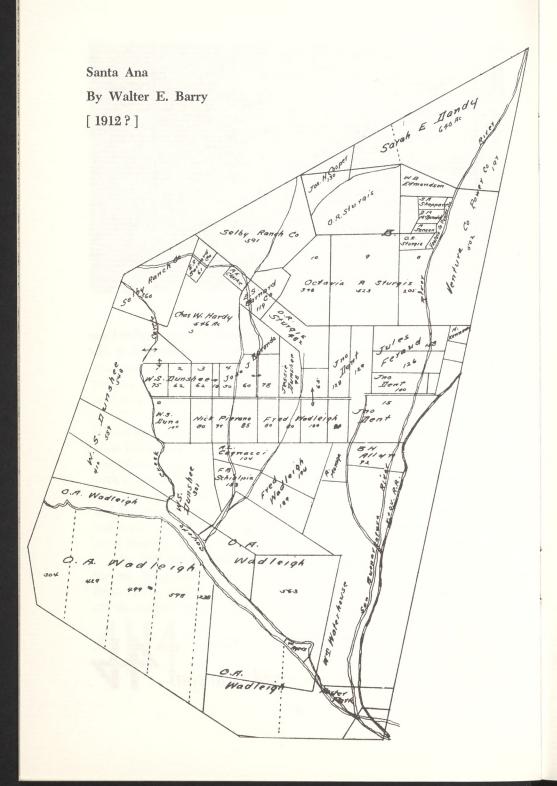


Cattle in corral

his pasture. The best grazing land in Ventura County enabled me to become a cattleman on a large scale; but times changed in the Thirties with the Depression.

Monte Vanegas

Bud Vanegas



## SUBDIVISIONS TO ESTATES

From Interviews #

Before The Santa Ana became a regional park around the reservoir called Lake Casitas, it had an intermediate development which showed its agricultural potential and local attraction. The change from ranching to farming was begun prior to the turn of the century. Indicative of this turnover are the very complicated water rights. Riparian rights require waterfront ownership. The Rice Ditch indicated by Charlie Petit in 1921 had operated since 1891. This source of water pre-dated wells. D. W. Rice had purchased Rancho Matilija.

Effie (Effesia Sargent) Hobson was a teacher of one-room Rincon School before she married Will. Hobson Bros. acquired the Coyote Creek property from O. A. Wadleigh; and bought 66 acres from an Ayala in order to have access to Casitas Pass Road. The house had been built by a Charlebois; there was a corral across from it and a bunkhouse nearby. They also leased the land of Otto Wilhelm for alfalfa; it could be irrigated from a natural source. Mrs. Hobson and her daughter Edith were joint heirs in the division of the estate in 1915.

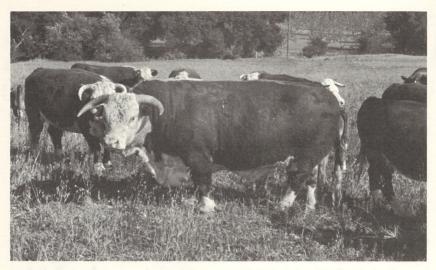
Edith married Walter H. Hoffman in 1913. He had been brought to Ventura County from New Orleans by Henry Oxnard who lived across the street from him there and needed a chemist for the sugar factory. The name of Rancho Casitas was patented with California Secretary of State Frank Jordan in 1926. The first horses raised by the Hoffmans were Percherons which they sold to the McGraths. Mr. Hoffman had an uncle interested in show horses, but they came into the ranch's activities as an aside. In 1927 he secured the first thoroughbred at an exceptionally reasonable price because it was ill. He diagnosed it as a tooth problem and it cured quickly. Crystal Pennant went on to win the handicap. In farming the ranch Walter W. Hoffman found the soil good enough to support one animal on four acres where the county average was one to 10.

John Dent came from England to manage an estate on Vineyard Avenue in 1904. When that deal was called off, he bought property

Hobson Bros.

Rancho Casitas





Taylor's Donald 13

from 'Huero' Obiols, including some in the Ventura River bottom. Much of his 600 acres was too rocky to farm so he hired a Chavez to cut down the oaks for cordwood: and it was taken to Los Angeles in boxcars to sell. On the remaining half he planted apricot, prune and walnut trees, a couple acres of grapes and alfalfa. In 1918 Dent sold out to join the British army; he was actually to see service with the Canadians for several months. His land then belonged to a Watson from Fresno, and became Hoffman property after 1945.

The loam of the Santa Ana Creek enabled the Schlapias to raise vegetables to market in Ventura; this German and his three boys had to drive their truck with its canvas canaopy through Hoffman land in order to reach the road. E. B. Schlapia used to sit on his front porch with a .38 across his knees waiting for the deer to come down from the hills; he received public attention when he went to court to change the pronunciation of his name. Commander Cook purchased the half parcelt to raise bullfrogs; they were all washed away down river in the winter of 1938. And Kay Hoffman Haley has Rancho Mi Solar on Santa Ana Road.

John Dent

Rancho Mi Solar





Nye home

The Peirano family believes their property was purchased from a man named Gee. A road perpetuates the name of Florence G. Baldwin, and the Nyes live in the lovely Waterhouse home.

The owners' names increased as more people bought smaller percels for residential property. John Barnard developed a lemon acreage; but more important was his cobble-stone living room, bath and a garage for his trailer; it has now become the home of John and Ruth Newman. Charles (Red) Dunlap, a mechanic in Ventura, needed a home for his horse. Both Editor Pinkerton and Dentist Errol Roberts finished out their lives in the Santa Ana. Merrill (Birdie) Allyn spent most of his time at a fishcamp on Anacapa. Bill Lucking, Jr. left The Ojai to build a house of his own at the tip of the grant.

- \* VCHSQ, (Summer 1971) XVI, 4, 23-5.
- # With Jack Dent, Kay Haley, Walter W. Hoffman, Nick Peirano and Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Shaw.
  - † The Robinson, Fawcett and Dean Subdivision shows 39 parcels.

